

Influence of Dance:  
Exploring Latin Culture Identity in Contemporary Dance

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## Introduction

The *Influence of Dance* premiered in February of 2020 in the Barnett Theatre at The Ohio State University. The overall goal of the project was to design a creative process that culminated in a choreographic work geared to change perspectives about cultural identity in dance. The project was structured as a two-section dance that starts with a solo and finishes with a large group dance with seven dancers. I performed the solo section, which was followed by the group section, both performed with live accompaniment. The group section was created over a period of seven months with a cast of performers from The Ohio State University in the Department of Dance. As the piece came to a close the audience was invited to join us in performance to add to our dance community. The *Influence of Dance* explores Latin culture within dance and how it is seen within contemporary dance forms. This includes multigenerational community, dance improvisation, and audience participation. In terms of process, I considered the number of dancers, their openness to Latin dances, proximity to Latin culture, and interest in multigenerational dancing. The creation process included research of my Puerto Rican heritage, academic research, and cultural conversations. I built the work by taking my dancers to local cultural events, like the Caribbean Festival in Downtown Columbus, Ohio. I used this experience to offer the group a sense of culture that involves music, dance, and rhythm. Throughout this paper, I will discuss how I used these experiences to create the *Influence of Dance*.

## Description of the Research

The choreographic research for *Influence of Dance* relied on personal experiences, independent studies, academic courses, the dancer's movement qualities, and conversations with

friends and family. I wanted to do this research because I was not raised in what is assumed to be a traditional Puerto Rican household which means I was not exposed to Hispanic foods, the Spanish language, or the traditional dances. I felt like a part of me was missing, and I chose to explore the missing piece through this project. I focused on researching traditional Latin dances and the way they inform my artistic choices. I also considered issues of discrimination, racism, gender identity, and socio-economic settings that Latin identifying people face daily. This research has helped me to improvise and create movement that connects with Latin culture. In the studio I used a lot of pelvis oriented movement along with swinging arms. I carried a lot of weight with my movement improvisations which took me to different levels within space. The improvisation was used to create phrase work for my cast. While the movement generation was an important aspect, I paid attention to what was already stored in my body from previous Latin experiences. For example, I had phone conversations with my Abuela about the different variations of what Puerto Ricans look like in terms of complexion and hair textures. I already knew that those of Puerto Rican ethnicity have differences in appearance so I chose a cast that showed diversity. I did this to represent the different complexions within the Latin community. Having these conversations with my Abuela was important because I learned first hand about our family, where she was born in Puerto Rico, and how the time she spent there impacted her life.

During the beginning stages of the choreographic process I took notes on the feedback that I received so I could look at and remind myself of certain things that were important to my project. At the beginning of the process I wrote, "I think of using a multigenerational community because young children are exposed to dance through motor skills." Beginning this project I asked myself, "why multigenerational?" and I wrote this down to remind myself why the

children's role throughout this process was important. Children have innate motor skills like mimicking and listening to musical rhythms that extend into adulthood. Since music plays an integral role in dance, I chose to use live music to provide a similar experience of what one would see within the Latin community. I started with one musician who predominantly played percussion instruments but could also dabble with other sounds. I chose someone with percussion experience because when I listen to Latin music styles I hear a combination of percussion instruments, horns, and shakers. The other musician used in this project was a pianist, because I wanted something to break up the traditional sounds and bring in a contemporary feeling to the work. Combining both musicians created a magic that I didn't know could happen. This mixture was related to the mixture of salsa dancing and contemporary dancing that I created in this work. At the start of the group section, the music shifts from soft piano sounds from my solo into vibrant drumming to introduce the dancers. This is the moment where the worlds of traditional Latin music and contemporary music collide. This musical composition provided the perfect setting for my movement and the multigenerational community that was being created.

Along with the physical research, I shared some articles with my cast that were introduced to me in my U.S. Latina Writer's course taught by Professor Marie Lerma. I shared Alan Pelaez Lopez's article with my cast about where the "x" in "Latinx" comes from and the meaning behind it. It helped my cast to understand the difficulties that can come with different ethnicities. I chose to use articles that stuck out to me to learn new information about Latin culture. To tie in my dance education experience, I explained to the dancers why I felt it was important to have movers of all ages and how the five young children were going to be used in this process. Combining education, cultural identity, choreography, and live music was exciting

for me because I had to juggle many components that were all equally important to this project. These components were important to this project because I created a community experience similar to a Latin dance community but in a performance space. As a process, *Influence of Dance* opened a new door for me to explore how to access my cultural identity through dance.

### **Critical Analysis**

I wanted to focus on Latin culture identity because I am Puerto Rican and White, which has caused me to experience people questioning my ethnicity. I feel like I have to defend who I am because I do not fit into society's "boxes". By boxes I mean the expectations for people who identify as something other than White. I am of lighter complexion compared to what society portrays what a Hispanic person's skin tone should be, I do not speak Spanish, and I am not from Puerto Rico. Due to these factors society feels that I do not fall into their "boxes" of being Hispanic. This is frustrating because when it comes to those who identify with White cultures many do not speak the language, eat traditional food, or do traditional dances from those cultures. For example, my grandmother on my mother's side is Polish. She does not speak Polish, does not make traditional Polish dishes or know the traditional dances, but she is in fact Polish because that is what makes up her scientific DNA and that is what she identifies as. During the process I considered the challenges of figuring out your ethnic identity or not wanting to find out your cultural history. I did not make my cast do research on their individual ethnic identities because I felt that was something each person has to want to do and it was a touchy subject for some dancers. I chose to discover my ethnic identity within my solo through choreographic choices such as how I utilized the space, my musicians, and my body to signify a Latin cultural identity.

Daniel Alvarenga's article discusses how Hispanic and Latinx are not a race but an ethnicity and people often confuse that. "[Hispanic](#) first appeared on the census in 1970. Before then, Hispanic and Latinx people were classified as white, and by their country of origin" (Alvarenga). Our society has a tendency to categorize people into "boxes" like "African American, White, Asian, etc" but most people do not notice that being Hispanic is not a race and is oftentimes asked as a separate question when filling out a job application or a survey. They do this because Hispanics or those of Latin culture do not have a "box" to be put in since they can be a mix of races. This quote influenced my process by providing a glimpse into history for those of Hispanic or Latin origin which pertains to my research by allowing me to include this idea in the movement. Towards the end of the group section, I come back into the performance space and circle behind the musicians to grab a shaker to add some texture to the sounds. After that, I danced to the center of the space and performed my solo choreography to this new rhythm to help me come full circle. I see this as redefining identity because in the beginning, I did my solo very slow and luscious to piano music, whereas here I did it to upbeat rhythms at a faster speed. I redefined my identity by showing how I can relate to both musical styles just as I can identify to more than one ethnicity and race.

While in the early stages of my research I found a poem by Aurora Levins Morales that I found to be amazing. A section that stuck out to me the most was:

"I am not African. Africa is in me, but I cannot return.

I am not taína. Taíno is in me, but there is no way back.

I am not European. Europe lives in me, but I have no home there."

- Aurora Levins Morales

I loved this section because I felt like she was talking about me. I identified with this quote because I know that my Puerto Rican family consists of people who have more African roots, more European roots and some Asian roots. All people have a combination of races and ethnicities, so even though this quote is directly about Puerto Rican heritage I think anyone can relate to it.

In my U.S. Latina Writer's course, I learned lots of new information about Latina identity. The class touched on topics of discrimination, gender/sexual identity, economic issues, mental and physical health. The information was overwhelming for me and my cast. Here is how we worked through the historical context in the process. I chose to share a few articles that stood out to me where I thought they could use the information to help them understand the purpose of the project and what I was asking of them. After reading one of the articles in rehearsal we had a discussion about what each person felt like their identity was. This was a tough conversation because some people hadn't thought about their cultural identity or they felt like they didn't have one because they were "just white". This was an interesting comment to me and I went on to explain to them that everyone, including white people, have a culture that they come from. One cast member, Maddie Cray, said she was Polish so I suggested maybe looking into the culture because I know that the Polish culture has a lot to offer if she was interested. It was difficult for each individual cast member to decide their ethnic identities, so I decided to have them figure out their dance identity because that was what was important to my project. As the director, I offered movement exercises that would impact how they viewed themselves as dancers and provide insight into how their identities can be used in this project to bring life to the choreography.

At the beginning of the *Influence of Dance* process, I chose to use children as an integral part because I wanted a variation in ages that was reflective of a Latin cultural dance experience. During conversations with my Abuela, we discussed how music and dance have been a part of her life since birth. Dance has also been a part of my life since I was four years old, so I thought it was relevant to showcase how children are a part of the cultural identity process through music and dance. I invited children from different cultural backgrounds because I wanted to make a statement that Latin cultural dancing can be done by anyone. As I worked with the kids we focused on learning movement and rhythms. There was live musical accompaniment at every rehearsal and I had the kids listen to what was playing and clap out what they heard. This was great for the kids because they had to pay close attention to what they were hearing and let the music guide them. The rehearsals mirrored the way children learn cultural dances within the Latin community. Another way I let the music guide their movement was to have them listen to the music and copy what I was doing such as stomping my feet, jumping, clapping, and shimmying the shoulders. I found that the kids were very open to the rhythms being played throughout this process and they did very well listening and copying my movement.

A lot of cultural cues can be found in music and children pick up on these. I noticed these cues being picked up by the children that I was around while on my study abroad trip in Brazil. During a performance at a local school in Arembépe, Bahia, Brazil, a young girl ran up to me and tried talking and dancing with me. She only spoke Portuguese therefore it was hard to communicate verbally, so I used dance to communicate with her. I chose some choreography that the Dance Brazil Tour Group performed earlier and pointed to her to see if she would copy the movement and she did. This was a great connection that we made because it proves that



language is not the only way to communicate with people. We also created a partnership through dance and this reminded me of the buddy process that I chose to do in my work.

During the first rehearsal I picked partners for the children to have so they had a buddy during this process. I chose to do this because they could all learn more about the community that was being created and the kids became familiar with who they would be working with during the show. I worked with the kids for an hour starting with a bonding activity of coloring. I thought coloring was the best idea to get the kids doing something they like while being around new people. We moved onto simple games such as follow the leader, a dance with scarves, and freeze dance. The kids did really well with these exercises and I was impressed with their carefree spirit and willingness to go for it. Our other activities included pretending to be animals, across the floor with jumping, crawling, and a game I call shape museum. Shape museum is where I had my older cast create a shape and freeze and then the kids had to make their way through without touching the dancers. This was important to do because it gave the kids the freedom to be creative and find a way out. I was very happy with how the kids responded to the activities that we did. I knew from there that their role in my project made sense for me. Their role in my project was to show how dance is relevant to those of all ages and throughout adulthood. You can see these activities in the work at the end when we used the scarves as a signal for the kids to get ready to join us in the performance space. I focused on the follow the leader activity and had them follow me around the space while copying my movement. Lastly, the kids could dance however they wanted with their partners until they heard the music stop and the lights went out. This was similar to our freeze dance activity so they knew what to expect.

The rest of rehearsal was dedicated to the OSU dancers and teaching a few movement phrases that would get the dancers moving and help me to assess how my movement looked on them. I had them play with improvisation so I could see their willingness to be spontaneous when improvising with simple directions. I kept it simple because I didn't want them to think so much about what they were going to make so I gave them the prompts of "risk and speed" to keep in mind. I focused on risk and speed because Latin dance forms always have variations in tempo and a sense of risk. In Latin dance styles you are constantly working with a new partner so you do not know what movement choices they will make so it becomes risky. I recorded these phrases and improvisation sections so I could look back and review their responses and see where to go from there.

Moving forward with the choreographic process it was very important for the dancers to have their own voices, and even though they may not be able to relate to this culture they could relate to certain ideas presented such as identity, rhythm and music. I started out by teaching them basic salsa and bachata steps. I had them practice them across the floor so everyone could hear and feel the rhythm. I did not have musicians at every rehearsal for the first semester, so I used recordings of Latin music to keep us focused on our goals. Taking both ideas of identity and Latin dance steps, I had them stay within the Latin rhythms while improvising. Their only direction was to listen to music and respond. I observed that some dancers were very comfortable with the rhythms while others felt uncomfortable with the challenge. This was interesting because even though dancers use music most of the time, different rhythmic styles can be complex and confusing to figure out. Working in this way gave me the idea of finding a way for

them to investigate what their dance identity might be. Rhythm connects to their dance identity because we dance based on what we hear and how the music makes us feel.

In order to figure out each person's movement identity, I had everyone improvise to random songs that I played and those of us who were watching wrote down adjectives and verbs describing tendencies and qualities of the movement. This was a great exercise because people pointed out things that one may not have known about how they move or how it comes across to others. As dancers we know what we like and what we don't like when it comes to our own movement but having outside eyes helps so we know if we identify with movement that is flowy, sharp, jumpy, slinky, etc. This exercise opened a huge door for my cast because it showed that everyone has a dance identity and it doesn't have to be one thing. This allowed them to be more open to my movement and how they can apply their dance identity to the choreography given to them. Even though none of them culturally identify as Hispanic, they could understand the idea I wanted to portray by connecting to their own dance identities. You can see this connection in the performance of my work where there is a flocking section which means I had three people take lead in doing any movement they chose as the others followed.

When teaching my movement to the dancers, there was a lack of command over the choreography, so I suggested that they take the original phrase and make it their own by mixing up the order, the repetition, and doing it in small groups. This was a chance for them to use their dance identities that we figured out. This loosened them up and from then on they knew they could make the choreography their own and not feel like they had no say so. After this, I started playing with compositional tools such as organizing them in different spatial patterns and tasks like doing the movement provided while staying on the ground, while another group traveled the

movement. They did great at this and I was happy because the movement intent changed while staying true to the original choreography. I had them teach each other what each person came up with and do it all together. From there, I put things together like puzzles pieces and played with how they could fit together. This was fun for me because there were so many different combinations I could use to build the work.

This was the point in my project where I needed more cultural context to help figure out what I am after when it comes to the Latin culture identity. During the Autumn semester, I did an independent study with Laura Rodriguez, a graduate student in the Department of Dance. I chose to do this with her because she identifies with a Latin cultural background and she would be a great resource for me. We had conversations related to my personal experiences being a Hispanic and how I wanted to share what I know about the culture and what there is to learn. I asked Rodriguez to come to a rehearsal to give a mini-Latinx workshop. I studied traditional dances in her Latinx course, so I thought it only made sense to give this experience to my cast as well. I felt it was important for her to share the information, rather than myself because I had just come into contact with the dance form and did not feel I could share it yet in a correct manner. She came in and taught the basics of Latin dancing such as salsa, cumbia, Bachata, cha-cha, etc. Everything she taught was similar to what I had already shared with my cast but more in-depth. Some people benefited from having this experience while others didn't understand why I brought her in. I explained that Rodriguez has cultural references that were relevant to this process so it was crucial to have her input.

After the mini-workshop, I had the dancers do the choreography that we had so far for Rodriguez to observe and give me feedback on maintaining the culture in the movement.

Rodriguez pointed out some very interesting things such as being careful of the variations of skin tone in my cast and making sure to mix up who is where. This made a huge difference because I did not want to create a work that separated anyone. This is important because in a Latin culture there are people of all shades and colors, and I wanted my work to reflect that.

I also discussed the costume ideas that I had with Rodriguez. I wanted bright colors and I liked the idea of ruffle skirts similar to traditional Latin style skirts. We discussed how the skirts come across very traditional and if that was not the route that I wanted then I should consider something different such as pants. At first, I did not like the idea of pants, but then I played around with drawing different outfits of various colors. I loved the idea of pants, but I wanted a ruffled top to keep the idea of the traditional culture but not too traditional since that was not the route that I wanted to take. The bright colors and ruffled tops were shown in the performance and brought out the joy of the Latin dance culture.

After this conversation, I shared a video of the choreography with my project advisor who focused on the choreography and spatial patterns, which I liked. Professor Perkins provided logical points to consider such as the amount of space that I am using, does the Latin experience appear, how to use touch within the movement and what that means. The feedback I received inspired me to dig deeper within the work and try new things. From then on, I tried different things such as using the movement that we already had and putting it in different spatial patterns and having fewer people do a certain phrase so there was more variation on stage. I had my cast take a few moments and just practice them while applying their knowledge from the mini-workshop class with Rodriguez. After this, I wanted to keep adding movement and moving phrases around. While doing this, I created three different versions of the dance that had all of

the same movement but in different orders. In terms of memory, this was a tough task for the dancers to complete. I needed to see them do many variations so I could choose what I liked best. I picked the version that made the most sense to me and I was satisfied with this choice.

Now that I had a final version of the dance I was focused on practicing it, cleaning up any confusion, and working with the children. The performance order of this project starts with my solo which I developed after creating the group section and the children's section. I envisioned the children joining at the end to come out and have a Latin dance party with us. I used the follow the leader exercise to get the children to copy me moving around the space. In the dance I was the leader and, with their partners, they followed along. After a few movements the kids went with their partners and danced however they liked. I allowed them to dance freely because it gave them the chance to be creative and spontaneous similar to Latin dancing.

Lastly, I choreographed my solo, where I still maintained the ideas of Latin cultural identity and how I connected to it personally. For my solo, I wanted soft piano sounds instead of intense drumming because I wanted to share a contemporary dance aesthetic while mixing in Latin dance steps. Also, in the group section and the children's section, there was a lot of drumming happening so I did not want ten minutes of drumming. If there was little variation in the music, the audience would not pay attention to the entire dance. When creating movement for my solo I wanted the movement to be slower than the other sections and I wanted to be flowy and slinky. I knew that my dance identity consisted of a lot of arm movements, slow/medium paced movement and the use of my hips. To bring out my Puerto Rican ethnicity I put emphasis on creating bigger hip movements and I used salsa movements throughout the choreography. I showcased all of my movement and cultural tendencies because it represents who I am as a

dancer and person. I felt that I needed to have a connection with my musicians but struggled with how to do so. My advisors Professor Crystal Perkins and Professor Daniel Roberts observed my solo and I was very unsure of how to connect with my musicians while not having eye contact with them the entire time. The musicians were brought further into the dance space so that it would be shown they were a part of this process just as much as the dancers.

Professor Roberts helped me to see how little shifts in my movement can make a big difference, especially when connecting with the musicians. His feedback inspired me to make small adjustments throughout my solo. Though the performance space was large and I could use the whole space I brought in the amount of space I used. In some parts of my solo I stayed closer to the musicians and changed my body orientation to face them. These small adjustments allowed me to connect with the musicians and I dug deeper into the cultural identity that was being brought out. I appreciated this because when choreographing on myself, I struggled with making final decisions about my choreography such as choosing spatial patterns and the order of the movement. The week before the show Professors Perkins and Roberts came to observe my piece and give feedback. This went well because there were only a few notes for my cast, such as to loosen up a bit for the Latin dance movements and to stay true to choreography without feeling constricted. This idea connects to their dance identities and even though there are specific steps, there were still ways for them to apply their personal style. After the final dress rehearsal, I told them to keep in mind everything that we've worked on and now it was time to have fun and show everyone what we have put together.

## **Results**

After the performance ended, I had one week before I was leaving to travel abroad with the OSU Brazil Dance Tour Group for two weeks. Going abroad was a big deal for me as I hadn't been out of the country before and this experience related to my project in so many ways because of the idea of dance, culture, and how children connect to it all. Brazil was amazing and made me realize how rich their culture was and how music and dance are very much a part of their everyday life. This was an eye-opener for me because I wish my cast could've had an experience like Brazil or somewhere else to see how culture comes alive through art. The *Influence of Dance* gave many of my cast members a positive experience and gave them the tools to open up and learn not only about another culture through dance but to learn more about themselves and never lose who they are in any movement given to them similar to my study abroad experience. Simone Burnett said, "In general, the project inspired me to really be proud of who I was, not only culturally but as a dancer and how I move because it is so specific to me and not one person is the same. As a society, we love to put labels on things and the minute we don't know how to identify something it becomes a bigger issue. I also love learning about other cultures and how diverse and colorful the world truly is. I felt very honored to have been invited to properly learn an aspect of someone's culture because that doesn't always happen." I felt proud to have given someone these feelings and experiences because I am still trying to figure out my identity. I am excited to do so because this project and the trip to Brazil made a huge shift in my life and has made me want to learn about who I truly am.

### **Future Goals**

The *Influence of Dance* has prepared me for my future goals because I had to put together an entire production, that was challenging for me. I was responsible for casting, reaching out to



parents, setting up rehearsal schedules and contracts, finding musicians to commit to the entire process, buying costumes, and most importantly, choreographing for 14 people. I gained a lot of knowledge from this experience that can apply to my future jobs in teaching and choreographing. I found out that I am capable of doing a lot and pulling it off smoothly. To apply this project to my future goals, I hope to become a choreographer and have my own company. This is a goal of mine because I love working with other people and creating movement for them. I want my own company so I can create a space that not only I am comfortable in but where my dancers are comfortable. By comfortable I mean, being able to be who you are without adhering to one company's ways. I want my dancers' input and their identities to be shown. I am also interested in teaching all ages because I like to share my knowledge with others and see how they can use it to their benefit. This project has also prompted me to plan a trip to Puerto Rico with my Hispanic grandmother and great aunt so I get a true understanding of the island and my family. I hope to do more traveling to many countries and learn how they connect dance in their everyday practice. After graduation, I am going to be teaching numerous dance classes and I want to always provide an environment where any and all cultures are welcome. All of my students are encouraged to be creative and think on their own and know that they matter.

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